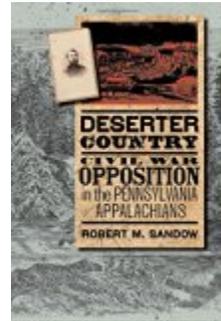


Robert M. Sandow. *Deserter Country: Civil War Opposition in the Pennsylvania Appalachians*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. xii + 234 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-3051-8.

Reviewed by Jonathan W. White

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Draft Resistance and Secret Societies in Civil War Pennsylvania

Robert M. Sandow's *Deserter Country* is a study of the "lumber region" of northern central Pennsylvania. Sandow's choice of subject is important for Civil War historiography as he offers an in-depth analysis of a previously understudied region. In many ways, the Pennsylvania Appalachians had a good deal in common with the Southern Appalachians—poor farmers, close kinship and community ties, and hardscrabble living conditions. Still, the Northern Appalachians had its own unique complexities. Many young men flocked to the lumber region in the 1850s in search of good wages and opportunity for economic mobility. They formed rootless, hard-drinking, rough-and-tumble communities in which men could come and go as they pleased. The society that emerged was one rife with economic, political, ethnic, and ideological tensions.

Such a region became a nightmare for Union officials charged with enforcing the draft. "The sparseness of the settlement contributed to the region becoming a 'deserter country' during the Civil War," writes Sandow. "Federal officials complained repeatedly that their small staffs were inadequate to administer military policies over so widespread an area. The expansive wooded mountains offered ideal hiding places for deserters and draft evaders. Poor roads and great distances from headquarters made it difficult to apprehend fugitives from the army" (p. 13). Added to these difficult geographical features was the fact that members of these isolated communities harbored deep suspicions of federal power and were willing

to help each other hide from federal authorities. "Such resistance was not a rejection of the American nation and its ideals, but a reflection of localism," writes Sandow. "Members of rural communities were accustomed to controlling their own social and civic affairs and resented the intrusion of outsiders.... Their localism and sense of economic marginalization reinforced wartime patterns of opposition" (p. 59).

Sandow found some ambivalence among central Pennsylvanians in the first year of the war when it came to enlisting. "In the lumber region of Pennsylvania, the *rage militaire* touched off by the onset of war encouraged some young men to join the cause," writes Sandow. "While patriotic motivations drew them into the armies, others remained aloof or cautious" (p. 45). Some Pennsylvanians did not want to give up the stability or wages of a lumberman for the danger and thirteen dollar/month salary of a soldier. Others were wary of enlisting because of rumors of mistreatment by the federal government, or because the sparse settlements in backwoods Pennsylvania did not allow men to form companies with their friends and neighbors. Still others saw farming to raise food for the troops as a patriotic form of employment; and married men often joined Home Guard units to protect the home front.

Partisan politics in Pennsylvania's Appalachia became heated and violent during the war. "While state and national politicians were more cautious about parti-

san appeals,” writes Sandow, “local politics operated with fewer restraints” (p. 62). Republicans claimed that opposition to Republican war measures was treason, while Democrats tried to distinguish between loyalty to the government and loyalty to the Lincoln administration (Democrats claimed fidelity to the Constitution but opposed the actions of the administration). Sandow argues that most members of the Democratic Party were basically loyal during the war. They were, in Joel H. Silbey’s apt phrase, “a respectable minority.” Accused of disloyalty and sedition, however, Democratic newspapers became the victims of mob violence. Following the destruction of one Democratic organ, a Democratic editor urged his readers: “it is the duty of the Democrats everywhere to stand by their newspaper publishers, not only to defend their property but to strike back, STRIKE BACK, we say” (p. 81).

In colorful and engaging prose, Sandow describes several instances of violent draft resistance and federal intervention in the Pennsylvania mountains in 1864. “Dissenters used every means possible to defy federal authorities,” writes Sandow, “including lying, intimidation, assault, and murder. Opposition came not from a single class of people but from whole communities.” Thefts, vandalism, arson, threats, and violence also increased among neighbors in the isolated communities of the lumber region. On a few occasions, deserters and their friends shot and killed federal officers sent into the region to enforce conscription. The “trifling force” of provost marshals was “insufficient” to deal adequately with the problems they faced in the mountains (p. 112). In an inversion of the typical story of soldiers and angry Republican mobs attacking Democratic political gatherings, Sandow found that the “majority of civilian violence fell upon ‘loyal’ citizens who could potentially aid federal officials in the hunt for deserters and draft evaders” (p. 113).

While *Deserter Country* is a community study focused on a small cluster of counties in central Pennsylvania, Sandow has larger historiographical points to make that will be of interest to scholars of the Civil War and to political historians. Sandow’s work clearly falls within the “Klement School” of Civil War historiography. Throughout his career, Frank L. Klement worked hard to rehabilitate the reputation of members of Democratic secret societies. Klement argued that secret societies, such as the Knights of the Golden Circle (KGC), the Order of American Knights, and the Sons of Liberty, were largely paper organizations. Their founders were dreamers and schemers who hoped to build large-scale auxiliaries of

the Democratic Party to protect against arbitrary arrests, resist enforcement of the draft, and stop interference at elections. But these groups never got off the ground, and most of the information spread about them was the product of overzealous Republican imaginations.[1]

Recently Klement’s work has come under fire. Jennifer L. Weber and Robert H. Churchill have published monographs critical of the “Klement thesis,” with Churchill focusing on the Sons of Liberty in the Midwest and Weber discussing the northern Copperhead movement more broadly.[2] Weber, for example, cites Klement’s work as “a good source for basic factual information” but writes that “I wholly disagree with Klement’s interpretation and conclusions about the danger these organizations posed to the government.”[3]

In her study, *Copperheads*, Weber argues that draft resistance in central Pennsylvania was dangerous and widespread: “The most serious resistance in the country emerged in a new place—Clearfield and Cambria counties in west central Pennsylvania—where 1,200 to 1,800 deserters, delinquent drafted men, and Copperheads reportedly organized and armed themselves to resist federal officers seeking to arrest them. The dissenters were so well organized that they were said to have a fort at Knox Township.”[4] Sandow criticizes Weber’s analysis for uncritically relying on a provost marshal’s report, saying that Weber “paraphrased [Richard I.] Dodge closely, including the imaginative figures and the assumption that resistance was ‘reportedly organized and armed’” (p. 213). Unlike Weber, Sandow argues that draft resisters in central Pennsylvania were not “organized” into secret traitorous societies but were small groups of local Democrats who formed political reading clubs and mutual protection societies intent on protecting themselves and their friends from federally coerced military service.

The “true” nature of secret societies in the North during the Civil War is again becoming a hot historiographical topic. In January and February 2007, a lively debate sprung up on this listserv regarding the Klement thesis and the nature of the KGC. One post stated: “The KGC and like ‘organizations’ (the ‘Order of American Knights,’ for example) were more fiction than fact, fabricated in large part by paranoid Union officials and Republican zealots who were eager to brand ‘Copperheads’ and peace Democrats as traitors and rebels.” After several responses critical of the Klement thesis, this contributor recanted the position he had earlier taken: “I am willing to admit the limitations of my perspective on the KGC, and to transcend them. I especially regret my over-

emphasis on the KGC as a 'fabrication.' Of course, the organization DID exist—I was merely trying (perhaps a little too hard) to indicate that the KGC is *very* murky historical territory.”[5]

The lively debate that is emerging today suggests that more work ought to be done on secret societies at the micro rather than the macro level. A little more than a decade ago historian Michael F. Holt suggested that scholars of the Civil War ought to pay more attention to politics at the “subnational level.”[6] Holt’s analysis is on the mark and applies even to the question of secret political societies. It is surely significant that a century and a half after the war we still cannot tell with certainty whether these allegedly massive organizations existed and what their intentions were. Secret societies, indeed, are very murky territory.

Whether or not one accepts the Klement-Sandow thesis, Sandow is on the right track in examining questions of loyalty and disloyalty at the state and community levels. (Incidentally, I have read through the military commission case files of the “Fishing Creek Confederacy” from Columbia County, Pennsylvania, in Record Group 153 at the National Archives. Even of those convicted of draft resistance, the judge advocate was unable to prove that any of the defendants were members of the KGC, as they were accused of being. This suggests that Sandow may be correct when he argues that Pennsylvania Democrats were not “organized” into a large dark lantern society.) Deep inquiry into secret societies in particular communities may be the avenue to determining the national reality and significance of secret Copperhead

societies. *Deserter Country* is an able step in the right direction.

Notes

[1]. Frank L. Klement’s most important work includes *The Copperheads in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); *The Limits of Dissent: Clement L. Vallandigham & the Civil War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970); and *Dark Lanterns: Secret Political Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

[2]. Jennifer L. Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln’s Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Robert H. Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns in the Tyrant’s Face: Libertarian Political Violence and the Origins of the Militia Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 107-144; and Robert H. Churchill, “Liberty, Conscriptio, and Delusions of Grandeur: The Sons of Liberty Conspiracy of 1863-1864,” *Prologue* 30 (Winter 1998): 295-303.

[3]. Weber, *Copperheads*, 243.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 195.

[5]. One can search for this exchange at <http://h-net.org/~{}civwar/>.

[6]. Michael F. Holt, “An Elusive Synthesis: Northern Politics during the Civil War,” in *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand*, ed. James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper Jr. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 123.

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